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Mystery of the 'Lost Hero' of the Holocaust

By Bill Soiffer

On a hot July day in 1944, a young Swedish diplomat arrived in Nazi-occupied Budapest on a mission that some now claim makes him the greatest hero of World War II. His name was Raoul Wallenberg, and he didn't look like a hero.

But the shy, soft-spoken, balding 32-year-old scion of an illustrious Swedish family has become known as the "lost hero of the Holocaust" for saving as many as 100,000 Hungarian Jews from the Nazis' extermination efforts.

Using his diplomatic status, Wallenberg personally saved Jews on trains en route to the gas chambers and on long "death marches" to the Austrian border by issuing thousands of Swedish "protective passports." He purchased or rented safe houses, which flew the Swedish flag and sheltered Jews.

Perhaps the cruelest irony of Wallenberg's fate is that he is believed to have spent the last 36 years in a Soviet prison camp. He was arrested by Russian troops at the close of the war and has not been heard from since.

Although today the Soviet Union maintains that he died in a Moscow prison in 1947, reports over the last three decades from former Soviet prisoners say Wallenberg is still alive.

The mystery has spawned Free Wallenberg Committees throughout the United States. Leading the Bay Area campaign is the newly elected congressman from San Mateo, Tom Lantos, and his wife, Annette, who both credit Wallenberg with saving their lives.

Lantos was 16 when he escaped from a Hungarian labor camp and found refuge in a Wallenberg safe house for 3/12 months until Russian troops captured Budapest.

Annette, who was 13, escaped with her mother using Portuguese passports, for which they believe Wallenberg was indirectly responsible.

Lantos will soon introduce a bill to make Wallenberg an honorary U.S. citizen, hoping the legislation will increase world pressure demanding to know Wallenberg's fate.

Mrs. Lantos, chairwoman of the U.S. Free Wallenberg Committee, said yesterday that a \$100,000 reward for accurate information of Wallenberg's whereabouts

and a \$1 million ransom for his release — will be offered by the organization next week.

The facts in Wallenberg's story read like a first-rate thriller.

In March of 1944, German troops were sent to occupy Hungary and Adolf Eichmann was assigned to work out the "final solution" for the country's 800,000 Jews, the largest remaining Jewish population in Europe.

It was a time of horror. Eichmann deported 12,000 Jews daily in sealed cattle cars to Nazi gas chambers. When the train routes were bombed, he ordered death marches to the Austrian border, 120 miles from Budapest. In Budapest, thousands were dragged from their homes and shot, including Annette Lantos' father.

"I wasn't there, but witnesses told me the story," Mrs. Lantos said. "My father was in a shelter and saw retreating German soldiers drag my grandmother out. He offered them a ransom, and they took him too and shot him by the Danube."

By the summer of 1944, the U.S. War Refugee Board called upon neutral Sweden to send a representative to Budapest on a mission to save as many Jews as possible.

Wallenberg, a businessman importing and exporting foodstuffs between Sweden and Hungary, was selected. Although he had no previous diplomatic training, he spoke accent-free German and was a world traveler. He had an honors degree in architecture from the University of Michigan, and in the 1930s he worked for the family banking business in Haifa, Palestine, where he first met Jews fleeing Nazi persecution.

"He was a frustrated businessman who regretted never having practiced architecture," said Guy von Dardel, Wallenberg's half brother, who is a visiting physics professor at the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center. He recalls his older brother as "kind and caring. He was a good organizer and often took the initiative."

Shortly after arriving in Budapest, Wallenberg started the wholesale distribution of Swedish passports. "They were legally meaningless. It was like me naming you the queen of England," said Lantos. "But in the turmoil of the war, it worked."

With money from the U.S. War Refugee Board, he bought or rented 32 safe houses and stocked them with food and medicine.

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Lantos was kept in a six-story apartment house, crowded in like cattle with 400 others, mostly elderly men and women. He remembers that Wallenberg outfitted young Jews in Nazi storm trooper uniforms and posted them outside the house as protection against marauding gangs of Hungarian Nazis.

The greatest risk Wallenberg faced was when he would personally go on rescue missions to work camps and train stations issuing protective passports.

One of Wallenberg's drivers, who now works as a chemist in Los Altos Hills, recalls that the danger "was like Russian roulette." He agreed to tell his story if he was not identified.

"We would go to a camp, Wallenberg and I, and he would always overwhelm the German SS with double talk," he said. "Wallenberg would threaten to call their superiors if they didn't cooperate. He bribed the high-ranking German officials or would promise them immunity after the war.

"Raoul usually carried a book listing names of passport holders. Sometimes it was all blank pages, and when he got to a camp he would make up 20 Jewish names and begin calling them out. I would scribble in the names on the passports and they would go free."

As the Russian army entered Budapest, Wallenberg drove to Soviet headquarters at Debrecen to ask for food and supplies. Presumably, the Russians found implausible his story — that he was a Swedish diplomat on a mission to save Jewish lives, carrying thousands of U.S. dollars — and he was arrested as a U.S. spy.

The only word of his existence came from the Russians in 1967, when it was announced that "the prisoner Wallenberg (sic)" had died in his cell of a heart attack 10 years earlier.

At an international conference on Wallenberg's fate in Stockholm last month, he was reported by anonymous sources to be alive as recently as last year in cell 77 of the the Soviet Union's Spets Korpus Prison.

Until recently, the Swedish government has been criticized for making only half-hearted attempts to learn of Wallenberg's fate.

Mrs. Lantos is convinced that there was a "Swedish conspiracy of silence" after the war. She said that Sweden, a Socialist country, sought good relations with the Soviet Union and was reluctant to press the case of a family member of a wealthy capitalist dynasty.

"I think he is alive now," said von Dardel. "The Swedish government was ill-advised after the war. They made large concessions to the Soviets, such as extraditing 50 Baltic citizens, without asking anything in exchange. It has been a black spot on the Swedish coat of arms."

The strategy now is to keep the Wallenberg case alive until there is an opportunity to extract concessions from Moscow. He has been nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize, once in 1949 by Albert Einstein and again this year.

Says Lantos, "I don't want to minimize the trauma of the 52 American hostages. But it is possible the Soviets have kept him in anticipation of some meaningful exchange and that Wallenberg is the ultimate hostage."



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